

A Mall By Any Other Name

Shelly and I spent an afternoon at the Mega Mall located on Clark Avenue just north of the Andersonville area. By far the most surprising discovery of the day was that the Mega Mall was not a mall at all, at least not in the way most Americans are familiar with the concept of a “mall.” No gliding escalators, no Pretzel Time kiosk, not even a GAP or Banana Republic in site. The Mega Mall, conversely is a type of market place; it resembles a consumer warehouse filled with endless rows of what I have come to think of as “raw” goods. That is to say no matter how hard you look you won’t find the slick packaging, shiny store front fixtures, or any of the other “framing” devices one finds in a typical mall store. For example, many consumers roam through the Disney Store for its ambiance and aesthetic as much for its products. The Mega Mall offers none of this, and its array of “raw” goods provokes a very different shopping experience and mindset.

The Mega Mall is laid out like a grid. Flanking rows and rows are stalls chocked full of all kinds of items: luggage, shoes, leather, jeans, sweat pants and casual or leisure clothes, lingerie, jewelry, toys, kitschy items such as dash board Jesus’ and glow in the dark Virgin Marys, a variety of clocks and paintings manufactured in the Velvet Elvis style of black backdrop and iridescent scenes such as ones of Chicago, New York or an African landscape complete with elephants and giraffes, music, movies, and furniture all vie for the consumer’s attention. Moreover, some of the stalls were so packed or simply stuffed with stuff that we often couldn’t see the merchant running the stall. As I was innocently looking at a variety of luggage (I am looking to upgrade my set and the largest piece was only \$24! Can’t shake a stick at that!) the Indian woman apparently running this particular stall appeared out of no where (from behind a shoe tree or crouched low behind a display of the Velvet Elvis clocks?) to “helpfully” assist me in my shopping excursion. She pointed out the great size and price of the suitcase I was looking at and proceeded to eagerly show me other bags that would match it to make a set. The result was, no luggage for me, and an uneasy feeling of being ambushed. I realize that the same sales approach would have been applied in nearly any other commercial retail store. To indulge in a brief anecdote, last week I was shopping for a bachelorette shower gift in Victoria’s Secret. An annoying sales woman, a Secret Agent I presume, sidled up to me and asked, “what’s your favorite color in your lingerie drawer.” Sales technique or creepy pick up line, I wasn’t sure which but it completely deterred me from buying anything in that particular store. Similarly in the Mega Mall I felt that I didn’t want to be hassled by any of the merchants, but I realized it was for a different reason. These merchants are not part of a huge conglomerate, they are not college or high school kids working part time jobs in retail hell, but maybe dependent upon these goods to support a family or a partner. A lost sale was perhaps more than a loss of fifteen or twenty minutes of their time. It definitely made me “shop” differently. In other words not touching or getting too close to any one product unless I was seriously intending to buy.

Conversely, we saw many people “haggling” or seeming to bargain with the merchants. Many shoppers seemed to know one another and the merchants, adding to the kind of communal atmosphere generated by the populace of the crowd. Young teens wandered around, families hunted in packs, small children scurried through the aisles trying to play with the toys on display,

and a few elderly seeming people relaxed on the picnic style benches in the Mega Mall's "eatery." Overall it seemed that most people were there to browse and socialize, to perhaps pick up a bargain, or to drop by and talk with one of the merchants. There didn't appear to be much consuming going on except for perhaps consuming the sights, sounds, and overall spectacle the Mega Mall offers.